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ABSTRACT

Incentives are commonly used by individuals and organizations to initiate change. Incentives are now being employed in education to keep students in school. In an attempt to determine the effectiveness of programs that utilize incentives, an analysis was conducted of the programs in the National Dropout Prevention Center's Focus Database that incorporate incentives as a major component. Analysis of the program profiles revealed that, although incentives differ according to intent, they can be grouped into four basic categories: education completion, academic achievement, attendance, and personal improvement. Incentives not only differ in their intent, but they also vary according to the target group at whom they are aimed. Students are the most obvious focus, however, parents, teachers, and even neighborhoods are being targeted. Despite the popularity of their use, there are many who do not support the use of incentives in academic settings. These educators believe that the use of extrinsic motivation undermines the student's intrinsic motivation. Incentives are simply one method, which if used appropriately, can encourage and motivate students. They should not replace verbal encouragement from teachers and parents, nor should they be the sole method of encouragement or reinforcement. However, when used to stimulate students or to keep them going, they can make a significant difference in performance. (Characteristics of successful incentives, and questions to administer to students for identifying incentives are included.) (LLL)

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A Series of
Solutions and Strategies

NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER

June 1991 Number 4

Incentives and Education

By
Myriam Seoane and Jay Smink

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Introduction

Incentives are commonly used by individuals and organizations to initiate change. An individual may use inducements to motivate himself or herself to reach some desired goal. Businesses, large and small, use incentives to encourage changes in behavior or action, either within the organization as a whole (money or time off for zero defects and increased production) or among the employees (reduced insurance rates for quitting smoking or losing weight). However, the effectiveness of an incentive is determined by individual perceptions and motivations. Does it meet the individual's personal or professional needs? To one, cash can be a primary motivator, while to another a trip or tuition reimbursement may supply the needed impetus to bring about change.

While incentives vary, they have one common goal; they strive to encourage, rouse, and move people to action. Their success in many other areas has prompted educators to ask, "How can incentives be utilized most effectively in the school setting?" Perhaps Webster had this in mind when he defined incentive as: "something that incites or has a tendency to incite to determination or action; something that constitutes a motive or spur; inducement (Third New International Dictionary, 1986).

The Role of Incentives in Education

Grades are the most common motivators in an educational setting For example, many students study for tests and complete their work because they want to earn a "good" grade. In fact, grades have been described as "the basic currency of our educational system" (Deutsch, 1979). Because of the controversy surrounding the use of grades many proposals are being reviewed by administrators. They suggest using a written section describing strengths and weaknesses of students instead of number or letter grades; including categories such as grade level and effort on all report cards; assigning grades by comparing students to norms; and replacing letter and number grades with checklists that provide information pertaining to the acquisition of the skills and goals of the specific grade level.

Many elementary school teachers use incentives as an integral part of their classroom management strategy. Candy, popcorn parties, special favors and privileges are some of the most commonly used classroom management incentives. Also, incentives are used successfully in high schools to encourage academic achievement.

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Monetary rewards, special recognition, scholarship competition, extra field trips, and discount tickets are all examples of the many incentives that are now commonly used to promote academic achievement within high schools.

Now incentives are playing a different role in education, that of keeping students in school. In recent years, states have begun to use driving privileges as an inducement for students to graduate. Driving privileges of teenagers in twelve states may be revoked for habitual absences or for leaving high school—a primary example of a program that is intended to help those students deemed to be at risk.

Analysis of Incentive Programs

In an attempt to determine the effectiveness of programs that utilize incentives, an analysis was conducted of the programs in the National Dropout Prevention Center's *Focus Database that incorporate incentives as a major component. As anticipated, there is wide variation in the types of incentives offered and the underlying motivations for their selection. They range from scholarships, cash awards, prizes and special recognition (most common) to more unusual options such as: child care, flexible class scheduling, individualized classes, homework centers, extra tutoring, special activities, field trips, and exempting exams. Comprehensive counseling programs are also offered as inducements for improved academic performance or increased attendance. As with individuals, incentives vary widely from school to school because of different local problems and needs. Analysis of the program profiles reveals that, although incentives differ according to intent, they can be grouped into four basic categories: education completion, academic achievement, attendance, and personal improvement.

**The Focus Database is a collection of files focused on dropout prevention. Information that can be accessed includes: profiles of dropout prevention programs, a calendar of events, an organizations file, lists of consultants, speakers and abstracts of materials in the Resource Materials Library.*

Education Completion Incentives

This type of incentive is designed to encourage students to complete school in order to pursue higher education or to join the workforce.

One example of this type of program is Eugene Lang's *I Have a Dream Foundation.* In 1981, Lang promised to pay the college expenses for a sixth grade class in a Harlem public school. Of that class, 34 are presently enrolled at least part time in public or private colleges. In addition to contributing funds, Lang became personally involved in students' lives by offering his help and encouragement in any way possible. Many similar programs have spread throughout the United States. More than 100 classes of underprivileged students in fifteen cities have been adopted by wealthy individuals or by others since Lang first laid the groundwork for this type of program.

Another incentive program that encourages students to graduate and further their education is the "Buddy Program" sponsored by the Dollywood Foundation. This program pairs seventh and eighth graders with one another as a "buddy" who provides guidance and support. Upon graduation from high school, each partner receives a $500 scholarship. Additionally, students who have completed this program may compete for other scholarships offered by the Dollywood Foundation.

The Boston Compact promises employment to those students who complete high school. The Boston Compact is essentially a partnership between the Boston School Committee and the business community. One of the many components of this partnership is that the business community has agreed to hire Boston Public School students and graduates on a priority basis for summer jobs, part-time jobs during school, and for entry level career opportunities after graduation. Since 1983, over 2,500 graduates have been hired by businesses that signed the original document. Additionally, in 1986 1,500 students received part-time jobs while 2,591 students received summer employment opportunities. The Boston Compact is not alone in its efforts to keep students in school. Many other cities have started similar

"compact" programs in which a public-private partnership and job incentives are the main components of the program.

Also many fast food businesses have joined in offering incentives to students. For example, both Burger King and McDonalds offer coupons to area schools to reward both behavior and academics. Pizza Hut also sponsors "Book It," a literacy program. Through the "Book It" program, students who read a certain number of books receive coupons for free pizza. These are just a few examples of ways that businesses and industries have joined in offering incentives to guarantee an educated workforce.

Academic Achievement Incentives

Academic achievement incentives motivate students to improve or maintain academic performance.

Nuclear Fuel Services of Erwin, Tennessee sponsors an academic achievement program throughout schools in Unicoi, Carter, Washington and Elizabethton Counties as well as those in Johnson City. The Goal Card Program began during the 1988-1989 school year. During the 1989-1990 school year, this program offered 26,000 students a chance to meet their academic goals. Students in grades one through twelve are eligible to receive either NFS Goal Cards or NFS Achiever Cards. Goal cards are earned by receiving straight A's during a six weeks grading period. Achiever cards are awarded on several criteria: grades (no lower than B's), perfect attendance or academic improvement.

Card holders receive discounts from area merchants. Each card contains the student's picture and is valid for only one six-week period. Cards must be validated by the principal or another appropriate official.

The Scholarship-in-Escrow program in Cleveland, Ohio, uses money. The program assesses a monetary value for academic achievement. Students in the seventh grade and higher can collect $40 for an A, $20 for a B, and $10 for a C they receive in core academic subjects. This "money" is placed in a college escrow fund to be used to defer expenses for postsecondary education.

Taylor's Kids, a program started by New Orleans businessman Patrick Taylor, is still another example of a program aimed at academic achievement. This program began in 1988 when Taylor addressed a group of students. All of these students were from a neighborhood in New Orleans in which crime and drugs were rampant. Like Eugene Lang, Taylor struck a deal with the students. However, Taylor's deal was a little bit different because he promised a college education to all those students who graduated with a "B" average. The reason that Taylor did not promise a college education to those with "A" averages was because he felt that these students could find financial aid elsewhere, particularly colleges and universities. Of the 221 original students that Taylor made this promise to, 172 are still in school trying to meet the Taylor "B" challenge.

A recent General Accounting Office (GAO) study showed that tuition-guaranteed programs are effective (Report on Education of the Disadvantaged 1990). Four different types of tuition-guaranteed programs were analyzed by the GAO study. The first type, known as sponsorship programs, selects one or more classes and guarantees postsecondary tuition. In this type of program the sponsor usually agrees to serve as a mentor through the school years. The second type of program analyzed was the "last dollar" program. These programs provide financial assistance to high school juniors and seniors who have taken advantage of other sources of financial aid but still need some additional funds for higher education. The "university-based" programs are ones in which colleges and universities guarantee admission and tuition to students who complete high school. The "pay-for-grade" programs, the fourth category, provide tuition money to students who achieve a certain grade.

Attendance Incentives

Incentives aimed at attendance are important because loss of too many school days can adversely affect students' achievement levels and consequently their motivation to stay in school (Gonzales, 1986). Many creative approaches to increase daily attendance are presently in operation across the nation.

For example, in Washington County, Maryland, middle schools and local McDonalds restaurants work together. Students may earn prizes based on the number of days they are present in school. Items such as food, T-shirts, hats, mugs, and free games at local video arcades are awarded to those who have perfect attendance, missed only one day of school or significantly reduced their rates of absenteeism. During the first year of this program, the number of students with perfect attendance almost doubled.

Students at Peabody High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who do not miss more than one day during the semester can qualify for prizes such as: stereo tape players, television sets, tote bags, and cash. Peabody High School's attendance rate is among the best in the city.

Attendance incentives are also used to encourage students to attend tutoring sessions. For example, South Carolina's Anderson District One currently has an extensive tutoring program. As an attendance incentive, students are given coupons for fast food restaurants every time they attend a tutoring session. From August 15, 1989 through May 18, 1990, this tutoring program served 705 students. The weekly average of scheduled sessions was 235.

Personal Improvement Incentives

Personal factors, such as teenage pregnancies and unstable home environments, also impact academic achievement and attendance. Some schools are incorporating improved and extended support services to deal with those nonschool related factors that affect student's motivation and performance.

An innovative example of a personal improvement incentive is the New Orleans Public School System which operates a school-based health center. The George W. Carver Health Center meets both physical and mental health needs. Students acquire points as they utilize the center. As points accumulate, students are awarded prizes which can range from Burger King gift certificates to summer employment. During the first year that the Health Center was in operation, 36% of Carver's combined senior and middle school population were registered and serviced. Current statistics show that 56% of the students utilize Center services.

Some programs offer more than one kind of incentive. The New Futures Community School, a creation of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, uses various incentives from cash awards for attendance and grades to other awards such as academy jackets for positive behaviors. Additionally, a work component guarantees summer jobs and provides other employment based on certain goals. The use of varied incentives helps the New Futures Community School meet the individual needs of their students.

Another program that uses varied incentives is Thumbs Up, sponsored by Sun Bank Miami, N.A. This program targets learning disabled students and offers various incentives for improvement in: academic skills, attendance, and citizenship. Stickers, mugs, painters caps, shoelaces and an end of the year luncheon called Top Gun are just a few examples of the items used in this program.

Targeting Incentives

Incentives not only differ in their intent, but they also vary according to the target group at whom they are aimed. Students, of course, are the most obvious focus. However, parents, teachers, and even neighborhoods are being targeted. The rationale: the tremendous influence that these groups have upon students, especially those at risk.

Incentives commonly offered to parents include such services as special counseling on jobs, careers, nutrition and health. And since many parents of at-risk students did not graduate from high school, literacy instruction and GED preparation are available.

Common teacher incentives usually include merit pay or career advancement. However, many new methods are being implemented for teachers. Many states now offer cash bonuses to teachers that are directly linked to the performance of students. For example, South Carolina teachers can apply for merit pay based upon students' improved test scores. Additionally, many of the new incentives include supplemental classroom resources and equipment as primary motivators. The Pittsburgh New Futures Community School has been successful by offering teachers summer employment opportunities, a stronger voice in school management, reimbursement for participation in extended school day and summer programs, extra resources, recognition awards, opportunity for additional education, and paraprofessional and volunteer assistance. The Boston Compact also awards grants directly to qualified teachers for the purposes of professional development.

Kentucky's program is structured differently. It is the first incentive program to offer financial incentives for schools to improve. These awards are based on improvements in student performance over a given period and are distributed among the entire school staff. Staff members then decide how the money will be spent.

A report released by the Southern Regional Education Board found that: "... teacher incentive systems show improvement in student achievement and changes in how school districts involve teachers in improving curriculum and instruction" (Education USA, 1991). The report also stated that twenty-five states currently have teacher incentive programs that include career ladders or mentor programs. Ten other states have other school incentive programs.

One of the latest innovations, in terms of target groups, is to focus on neighborhoods which house a concentration of at-risk students. Some programs have even been established that provide incentives for entire neighborhoods, or for people to work within neighborhoods deemed to be at risk. The Neighborhood Family Support Initiative, a program that works with neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, provides various different incentives for neighborhood-based community service. They include: recreational activities, counseling, education, and career services for the neighborhood. Those neighborhoods targeted are expected to form committees that formulate goals for improving the lives of the children within the community. These goals focus on areas such as: teenage pregnancy, school attendance, academic improvement, and dropout prevention.

Almost every school in the United States uses incentives in some form or another, whether it be to encourage attendance, academic achievement or other goals. Sometimes these programs are implemented by teachers, sometimes by administrators, sometimes by district personnel, or even by community and business partners.

Although incentives may differ in variety, be tangible, intangible or any combination thereof, schools have found that they are effective in striving for excellence within their own system. In one Forrest County, Mississippi program, administrators saw the number of students with straight A's more than double after awarding to students "gold" cards for discounts at various community businesses.

The Controversy

Despite the popularity of their use, there are many who do not support the use of incentives in academic settings. These educators believe that the use of extrinsic motivation undermines the student's intrinsic motivation. For example, Jerry Conrath (1988) says, "... it is unforgivably patronizing to lavish external rewards on at-risk kids every time they do something right. Supply-side economics may have led to this in education, but the only way we will successfully raise self-esteem and help kids feel good about themselves is by focusing on the internal reasons for why they do what they do." Milford Holt (1987)

also disagrees with the current trend toward extrinsic motivation for students. He says, "... the reward we offer to every person engaged in work is the pride and satisfaction that comes from a job well done... Do we stress to our young people that the opportunity for pride and satisfaction in tasks well learned is available to them? Or do we stress the extrinsic rewards...?"

Albert Shanker (1990) disagrees with the argument that incentives should not be used because he believes that incentives serve to get people started. Shanker also points out that our economic system operates on all different types of incentives. He says, "... most adults go to work regularly and on time because of an elaborate system of incentives that are as external to their work as cokes and hamburgers are to school attendance."

Characteristics of Successful Incentives

In analyzing the many kinds of incentives that are presently used to motivate and interest students in completing their education, we have found certain characteristics must be present for success. Incentives can be effective under the following conditions if:

- they establish definite patterns for changes in behavior.
- they are geared to the interests of students.
- they are attainable by most students.
- there are consistent standards of implementation.
- students understand what they need to do in order to attain the rewards.
- recognition is given to those receiving the awards.
- different levels and types of incentives are offered for different levels of achievement.

Incentives Work

The debate continues, but one important thing to keep in mind is that incentives motivate and reinforce desired changes in behavior or actions. They are simply one method, which if used appropriately, can encourage and motivate students. They should not replace verbal encouragement from teachers and parents, nor should they be the sole method of encouragement or reinforcement. However, when used to stimulate students or to keep them going, they can make a significant difference in performance. With this in mind, educators can carefully plan their incentive programs to ensure that the rewards offered are appropriate for the individual or group with whom they will be used. The questions below when administered to students can help educators and others identify and use incentives which motivate young people to stay in school as well as develop positive behaviors and habits that will last throughout their lives.

1. What kinds of things would you like to have?
2. What kinds of things do you like to do?
3. What do you do when you have free time?
4. What people do you like to be with?
5. What do you like to do for fun?
6. What do you do to relax?
7. What is your favorite place to visit?
8. If you could go anywhere you wanted to go, where would you go?
9. What makes you feel good?
10. What kind of things are important to you?
11. What would you buy if you had an extra $20? $50? $100? $1000?
12. What kinds of things do you spend your money on?
13. What are your favorite daydreams or fantasies?
14. If you could have three wishes, what would they be?
15. What is the one thing that you want more than anything else in the world?
16. What is the one thing you would not give up?

(Adapted from Watson, David L. and Roland G. Tharp. Self-Directed Behavior: Self-Modification for Personal Adjustment. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Monterey, California: 1981.)

One thing is certain—more research is needed on the long-term effects of incentives used in the schooling process. Do they have a permanent effect on behavior or are new and different incentives necessary to engender motivation? Because of individual differences, some plans will not be effective for some students. Educators who pay close attention to the needs and desires of their students will be able to choose those incentives that are effective in creating change.

PROGRAM LIST

The programs mentioned in the text are listed below. For additional information contact the organization and/or the individual listed below.

Anderson District One Tutoring Project
Anderson School District One
PO Box 99
Williamston, SC 29697
(803) 847-5208
Joanne Little, Tutoring Coordinator

Boston Compact
26 Court Street
Boston, MA 02108
Jacqueline Rasso, Project Director

Burger King Corporation
17777 Old Cutler Road
Miami, FL 33157-6347

Dollywood Foundation
700 Dollywood Lane
Pigeon Forge, TN 37683-4101
(615) 428-9606

Focus Database
National Dropout Prevention Center
205 Martin Street
Clemson, SC 29634-5111
(803) 656-2599
Marty Duckenfield

George W. Carver Health Center
Task Force on Dropout Prevention
229 Verret Street
New Orleans, LA 70114
(504) 361-1919
Nancy L. Miller, R.N.C. - Chair, Program Sub-Committee

I Have a Dream Foundation
31 West 34th Street
New York, NY 10001
Tony Lopez, National Director of Support Services

Kentucky Department of Education
1729 Capital Plaza Tower
Frankfort, KY 40601
(502) 564-3678

McDonalds Corporation
1 McDonalds Plaza
Oak Brook, IL 60521-1900
(312) 575-3000

Neighborhood Family Support Initiative
New Futures Community School
Pittsburgh Public Schools
Bellefield Avenue at Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213
(412) 622-3981
Ronald R. Sofo, Special Projects Administrator

Nuclear Fuel Services
205 Banner Hill Road
Erwing, TN 37650
(615) 743-9141
Tony Treadway, Communications Specialist

Peabody High School
515 North Highland Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15206
(412) 665-2050

Pizza Hut Inc.
PO Box 428
Wichita, KS 67201-0428
(316) 681-9000

PROGRAM LIST

Scholarship-in-Escrow
1380 East Sixth Street, Room 312
Cleveland, OH 44114
(216) 781-7430
Dr. Rosie N. Doughty, Executive Director

Taylor's Kids
Taylor Energy Company
234 Loyola Building, Suite 500
New Orleans, LA 70112
(504) 581-5491
Mr. Roy Leblanc

Thumbs Up
Dade County Public Schools
Department of Community Participation
1450 N.E. 2nd Avenue
Room 217
Miami, FL 33132
Zandra Albury

Washington County Board of Education
PO Box 730
Hagerstown, MD 21741
(301) 791-4000

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The National Dropout Prevention Center's mission is to significantly reduce the dropout rate in American schools by helping to develop public-private partnerships between schools, businesses and communities to address this crisis.

The purpose of this series is to target issues which affect at-risk youth. Your comments and suggestions on this and other publications are welcome.

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